

A Poet of Achievement and One of Promise

STEPHEN WATTS

The Blue Bag

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65 Greenford Road, Harrow HA1 3QF

TODD SWIFT

Rue du Regard

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Stephen Watts' *The Blue Bag* is a very welcome collection by this somewhat elusive poet, known mainly through his readings (and he is an extraordinary reader), as well as through his work as a translator and editor. True, Watts has published two other collections, *The Lava's Curl* and *Gramsci and Caruso*, and in fact this present publication draws on both. Yet his poetry seems to have circulated little, except through his personal presence at readings. This is a pity, for he is one of the finest and most singular poets currently writing in the UK.

Watts is a poet of enthusiasms, passions and devotions, as well as a poet of learning, however unacademic. (He is not an academic by profession and, more to the point, his poetry doesn't have the dry, abstract, pedantic quality too often associated with "academic poetry".) This combination of passion and learning has a distinctly European flavour, and it's interesting to note that Watts refers to German, Russian and Spanish poets (Hölderlin, Khlebnikov, Tsvetaeva, Blok, Gongóra, amongst others) in a number of his poems. At the same time, his poetry is deeply – again, passionately – rooted in his experience in diverse localities, including London's East End, where he lives, and in a sense of community that extends from the people of those localities to a community of poets, both living and dead. When he writes about the East End or about North

Uist, there is a conviction to the words themselves as well as to the emotions in the poetry, just as there is when he writes, say, about Tsvetaeva or Camões.

There are certain things that characterise Watts' poetry (though not predictably) – things that are quite distinctively his. I mean this in the sense that I never read a Stephen Watts poem and feel that I would even *begin* to mistake it for another poet's. In 'Gongóra on His Deathbed' (p. 80), he writes of "the soul of Gongóra" as "well-sculpted and thus flawed to perfection". I am tempted to apply this phrase to Watts' poetry, but only (as he indeed intends it) in the most positive sense. There are certain liberties with grammar and syntax in his poetry that come from confidence and skill, not at all from any ineptitude: one discerns a gifted and practised craftsman's feeling for his materials underlying the poetic vision. More than anything, however, it's the intensity of his engagement, spiritual, emotional and social, that not only shines within Watts' language, but is also apt to erupt within it, or cause it to coil, serpent-like, or suddenly break off as if snapped. Passionate flow can change to contiguity in an instant, as well as incorporate sudden swerves in course. At the same time, Watts is able to draw on cool observation and conceptual underpinning, when he needs to. These are qualities that may co-exist ingeniously with dream imagery – most obviously in his very fine long poem 'What 31 Children Said About Dreams'. Yet there is a dreamlike or hallucinatory feeling to a number of his poems. For example, in 'Lord in Dream' (p. 11) he writes:

Lord in dream I was lifted out of London
and sailed above the branny floors of
the earth. I went north over Scotland and
reached Barra and hovered over Uist like
a sick kestrel and looked down at islands
strung out like pearls about the gorge of
the western sea – good corn stooked up –
and got to Iceland in wakes of blue air.

There on a brindled moor lay a hall –
not a supermarket of packages and food
but the library of a culture not unearthed
and thought printed in its bright language.

Tellingly, he ends the poem with the lines: “A sick weapon that makes of us fragments / would strike me from such abrupt heights, / Lord in dream I was lifted off this earth.” There is an awareness of both the visionary and oneiric *and* the social and political in these poems.

A decision not to include any “of the long poems from after 1997” (p. [6]) has meant that neither ‘Praha Poem’ nor ‘Birds of East London’ – two of Watts’ very finest poems – are available in this collection (though they are both in *Gramsci & Caruso*, Periplum, 2003). Otherwise, this is a good, balanced selection of Stephen Watts’ poetry, possibly apart from a few too many poems about friends and acquaintances among the impoverished, disenfranchised and marginalised of our society. These latter speak to Watts’ compassion and also his anger; yet they also run the risk of falling into a mode of writing which is sentimental as well as rhapsodic, even if his honesty keeps this at bay for the most part.

The Guinness Trust and Brady Street Dwellings.
Tea in the ABC with ageing Jews, her brothers and
spiteful sisters. If they called her a whore, I’m
one too, writing this here

(‘A Song for Jean Harris’, p. 16)

The book is in some ways the richer for their inclusion, but they tend not to be his very best poems – for this reader, at least.

Stephen Watts’ work has a sense of passionate abandon; yet, as I have noted, there is undoubted skill, control and grace to it at the same time. This, I feel, is the marvellous paradox of his poetry.

Like Stephen Watts, Todd Swift might be thought of as a cosmopolitan poet. This young Canadian has lived in Budapest, and his new book *Rue du Regard* concerns a sojourn in Paris as well as time spent in London (where he currently lives). (“The poems in this collection were written and/or revised in Paris and London between 2001 and 2004”, he writes (p. [81])). ‘I have made this book in two parts, to cross the channel between the two cities. The presiding spirits of decadent Huysmans *and* logical Ayer attempt to find balance.”) References to places, writers and films abound, in such a way as to validate the notion of a savvy, well read, travelled poet. Unfortunately the poems often read as if they were written for this very purpose, rather than anything more worthy or substantial. At the end of one of his best poems, ‘My Violin Player’, Swift writes: “Music is wild, severe: just as love” (p. 68). If only this could be said of his poetry! At his best, Todd Swift is a promising poet whose work is entertaining, ingenious, humorous and likeable; though as yet, nothing more than this. All too often, it feels as if he is simply going through the motions – writing poems for the sake of it, without any trace of necessity for the poems to be written (apart from the poet’s “need” to see another book published). For example (p. 30):

Sight and Sound

I read reviews in order to know which films to see.

I rarely, if ever, refer to them as *movies*.

I prefer to rent DVDs. They carry so much extra

in the way of features; we enjoy the trailers more

than the main content: because the high-octane editing

compressing action, from choicest parts, is like *poetry*.

You can see it in the bland, lazy language of the poem – this lack of any sense that the words *need* to be there, on the page, out of the poet’s heart and mind, and there in the reader’s mind (and

on his or her tongue). Swift also betrays a lack of poetic maturity in a piece like ‘By the Pool’ (p. 10):

We sit by the pool, its ideal rectangle hyper-serene
at the stone farmhouse’s edge, on a ridge which,
isolated, *Straw Dogs* style, looks over
fields of unready corn, burnt-black sunflowers.
The shocking, inert spread-eagle of a lizard
lies still, Christian, at the bottom, unlike
his earlier fluid manifestation, tongue-like,
or built of fire, so ruinously out of its dry court.

The laziness of “hyper-serene”, the inappropriateness of “*Straw Dogs* style” (striking a false note), the facile “Christian” – these produce such a weak, sloppy effect that when Swift tries to move into elegiac mode (“Enda – tall, sweet, lovely – had died” (p. 11)), he needless to say falls completely flat.

One other comment: in the ‘Notes On the Book You Have Just Read’, Swift mentions that during the writing of these poems “much thought went into the ongoing debate between the ‘accessible’ and the ‘innovative’ (or Mainstream and Postmodern as some say in the UK) in contemporary poetics” (p. [81]). What on earth is he talking about? I tend to feel that the term “innovative” only has rather limited use, that is, as a sort of *shorthand* for referring to various poetic practices that seek to explore language itself in an intense and radical fashion. I stress “*various*”; and I would have to go into a good deal of detail about how this exploration relates to additional concerns. It would also need to be said in what ways certain other, “non-innovative” types of poetry might be said to explore language – rather than, say, simply treat it as a transparent medium for conveying information, decked out with metaphor and simile as decorative frills. But if I named J.H. Prynne, Allen Fisher, Ulli Freer, Ken Edwards, Rod Mengham, Robert Sheppard and Peter Jaeger, for example, that might give some idea of the poets

who tend to be described as “innovative”. I’m not asserting that Todd Swift should necessarily be, or try to be, an “innovative” poet. What I am saying is that I can’t see how Swift’s work relates in the slightest to “innovative” poetry nor why he (quite clearly) feels that he should be seen as having some relation to it. (I would guess that this is on the misguided assumption that some measure of artifice and large helpings of cultural allusion amount to “innovation”.) This may seem a small point, yet it adds to the sense I have that Swift not only hasn’t worked his way through to a poetry that feels wholly necessary and wholly his own, but doesn’t have a clear sense of what his work relates to. On the basis of the promise shown in the present collection, I look forward to the day when he reaches a fuller poetic achievement.

David Miller